

# Thersites

My sociological friend Thersites was much amused to hear of the tendency of low-grade journals to sketch circulation-boosting pictures of the 'average' British family. This, he was surprised to hear, consists of a husband and wife called Norman and Judy and their three children. Norman works in an insurance office in Reading, Judy is a secretary of the local badminton club, teaches at Sunday school and is always ready to discuss important issues, and their children play the cello, decorate old people's homes and so on. This is all extremely wholesome and Thersites was moved to speculate what the average Greek family was like. Here is the result.

## Ripping times

There is a husband 'Dikaiopolis', a wife 'woman' and any number of children, all called 'o child' which causes considerable confusion because this is what the slaves are called too. They live very far from Reading in a farm in the middle of Attica, through which runs a water course with the contentious habit of spilling over into their neighbour's property. The farm produces olives and grapes when it is not being ravaged by invading Spartans, and somewhere in the grounds is a sacred olive-stump.

'Woman' is a highly ambiguous creature, now selling ribbons in the marketplace, now weaving for a while in Oriental seclusion, occasionally knocking off a fragment of a widely-acclaimed poem in Sapphic metre, and then terrifying the wits out of her poor husband by charging off into the mountains to rip wild animals apart and eat them. Dikaiopolis, naturally somewhat cowed by this versatile creature, has opted for a less confusing existence. He spends most of his days fighting an appalling hangover and wrestling with beautiful young men in the gymnasium, although the price of enjoying them physically seems high when set against the ever-present threat of close questioning about the nature of the Good from the batteries of philosophers who seem to haunt the place. Four times a month he slopes off to the Pnyx to hear Pericles reading out lengthy extracts from Thucydides. He can hardly sit down for fear of doing himself a permanent injury from the bits of broken pot lying all over the place with 'Themistocles' written on them.

## Phalli and Snakes

There are frequent festivals, the main purpose of which seems to be to wave about *phalli* hundreds of feet long, get roaring drunk, hurl insults at the neighbours and watch Greek plays. In the afternoon he staggers off to a symposium, where there will be the normal slave-girls wearing precious little and playing two oboes at once. Here he and his male friends lounge about on couches, cap each others' poems and become paralytic with drink, all except the philosophers who stand on one foot for hours discussing whether you can say nothing. The party closes in uproar and on his way home Dikaiopolis trips in the mud and gets beaten up by a gang who strip off his cloak and punch him in the eye. The cure for this is being

bitten by a holy snake in Epidaurus. In fact, the fellow never does a stroke of work, but come May 1st the fighting season opens, when he polishes up his hoplite armour and clanks off into the ranks. Whether life during the rest of the year prepares him or compensates him for the spear in the guts he stands a high chance of getting during the annual fighting season is a question best addressed to his shade.

### **Grimy Nudes**

'Child' is famous for her deportment since she spends a great deal of her time dressed up as a sacred bear and walking in processions with a holy basket full of grain balanced on her head. Otherwise she weaves and goes to the well to collect water *or* to do the washing. In both cases she is liable to approaches from grimy nudes carrying bushes and attempting to seize her knees under the most tenuous and unsubtle pretexts (e.g. 'needing help'). She may even be seduced by a god, but in this case she has the option of turning into a laurel tree.

Other 'child' goes to school with 'slave' where the curriculum seems to be very sensibly restricted to Homer and music. This 'child' goes somewhat warily to the gymnasium afterwards, since any number of repulsive old philosophers will try to wrestle with him and others will load him with pots telling him that he is 'beautiful'. He throws these away into graves on the way home. Sometimes he is given animate gifts and has been known to struggle home with a fawn *and* a chicken on the same day. 'Slave' deals quietly but firmly with these. 'Child' number 2 is rather looking forward to the day when he begins to attend lectures by sophists. Rumour has it that they will equip him with arguments enabling him to persuade his father that he should be allowed to behave as his father does, but whether father will buy this is a moot point.

All in all, Thersites felt that life with Norm and Jude in Reading might come as a considerable surprise to those who have to take some of the blame for it.